

The Fourth Church Pulpit

FAMILY REUNION

August 15, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094

Phone: 312.787.4570

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

**"And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."
Genesis 45:15 (NRSV)**

Family reunions. It's the time of the year for them. I've been to one already this summer and this very weekend is the annual date for another one which I have not been able to attend for years . . . but when the date rolls around I find myself thinking about it a lot. There is no event more human, it seems to me, than a typical family reunion. It is, I suppose, a commentary on the way we live that families have to schedule reunions in the first place. Time was when families lived together, gathered not only on holidays and designated occasions, but moved in and out of one another's lives almost daily.

By contrast, a family reunion today may be the only occasion when members see one another. Just yesterday I kept encountering people on Michigan Avenue wearing T-shirts which announced "LEWIS FAMILY REUNION, CHICAGO, AUGUST 14, 1993" and I wondered if they needed those T-shirts to identify one another. At the reunion I attended earlier this summer, adolescent nieces and nephews met middle-aged aunts and uncles for the very first time. It was remarkable, and fun, but poignant in a way.

Because family is so basic to human beings, so powerful in determining who we are, who we become, who we understand ourselves to be, a reunion can be a fairly precarious occasion. Who knows who might show up, or what long-dormant argument might resurface, or what long-buried resentment or grudge or hurt or slight might reappear?

The annual family reunion can be a blunt and eloquent reminder of the gap between the ideal, romanticized notion of family that many of us keep alive in our hearts — and the reality of family as we actually experience it.

The ideal family is a creation of television sit-coms, says David Halberstam in his new book, *The Fifties*. For a whole generation Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Ricky and David, The Cleavers, Father Knows Best, defined normal family.

"There was no divorce. There was no serious illness. Families liked each other, and they tolerated each others' idiosyncrasies.

"Moms and dads never raised their voices at each other in anger. . . . There were no drugs.

"Sibling love was always greater than sibling rivalry. No child was favored, no one was stinted." It was never clear what the dads did to make money but there was always enough. Ozzie was at home all the time. He never seemed to be at work and yet he was successful. The Cleavers always ate together and June Cleaver cooked two hot meals a day and baked her own pies."

Halberstam observes: "These television families were to be not merely a reflection of their viewers but role models as well."

There is a tragic and poignant postscript. Of all the sitcoms only the Nelsons were a real family. Ricky Nelson became a rock star and teen idol — and then harsh reality: a marriage that seemed perfect went sour, excessive drug use. Halberstam says "Ricky Nelson, the charming, handsome, all American boy was, to all intents and purposes, the unhappy product of a dysfunctional family." [p. 508-520]

The reality is often very different from the ideal.

Before there is reunion there is separation, and sometimes alienation; and resentment and anger...

One of our faith tradition's most precious stories is of a remarkable family. It is a story of reunion, but first it is a story of very real dysfunction and tragedy.

It is truly a Genesis story, an original, a wise story which helps us understand who we are, and in addition, who our creator is, and what kind of life our creator wants us to live. And it is a thoroughly human story, almost embarrassingly human in its detail.

The original family reunion — the original dysfunctional family — is Jacob's, or Israel's as he came to be known. Jews and Christians know Jacob as a patriarch, along with his father, Isaac, his grandfather Abraham, and his son Joseph. Belatedly, Jews and Christians are learning to call the wives of these men "matriarchs" and to value their partnership and their courage and their faithfulness . . . Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel.

These people are human. None of them qualifies for sainthood, if we mean by that term moral rectitude and purity. Each, in a way, is roguish, petty, occasionally outright dishonest. One of the tricks both Jacob and his grandfather Abraham tried to pull, in a tight spot, was pretending that their beautiful wives, Sarah and Rebekah, were their sisters, and offering them to the king as concubines, in order to save their own skins. And, of course, old Jacob, long ago had persuaded his older brother, Esau, to trade him his birthright — his right of inheritance for a bowl of oatmeal, and to make matters worse, deceived his blind father.

These are interesting but not necessarily virtuous people in the usual sense of the word.

Old Jacob had a lot of children — twelve of them, sons. And we know there is trouble ahead when we read in Chapter 37:

"Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his children, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a long robe with sleeves," that is, Donnie Osmond's "many colored dream coat."

Rudimentary knowledge of family systems, basic common sense, says there is trouble ahead. Not surprisingly young Joseph enjoys his father's favoritism. Who wouldn't? Joseph isn't smart enough to be discreet. In fact, Joseph flaunts it in front of his older brothers. Is there a family anywhere in which the older siblings are not convinced that they bore the brunt of their parents' unreasonable expectations and that their younger brothers or sisters get away with daily murder? "Surely, Dad, you're not going to let him do that! Why, when I was his age you made me eat the broccoli, shovel the walk, cut the grass, be in at midnight," etc., etc., ad nauseum.

Joseph makes that dynamic infinitely more painful by flaunting his favored status. He has dreams in which his brothers are bowing and scraping in front of him. And not only does he have the dreams, writes Frederick Buechner, "he recounts them in sickening detail at the breakfast table the next morning. He was his father's pet, and his brothers seethed at the sight of his many colored coat while they were running around in T-shirts and dirty jeans." [*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 77]

And so, one day, when father Jacob sends Joseph out to the far pasture to check up on his brothers who were hard at work tending the family livestock, real trouble begins. I've heard older siblings threaten to kill younger brothers or sisters and these brothers very nearly do it. When they throw Joseph into a pit to talk it over, a trade caravan headed for Egypt passes and so they sell their younger brother into slavery, avoid killing him and make a few dollars. Then they tell Jacob that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. And the old man is inconsolable. He will not be comforted.

To make a long story short, Joseph prospers in Egypt; becomes an expert manager of his master's household and his ability to interpret dreams lands him a job in Pharaoh's palace where, after a period of time, he becomes essentially the C.O.O. of all Egypt. Joseph is an astute businessman. Successfully predicting a famine, he warehouses lots of grain so that when the famine comes, business is very good on the Egyptian commodities market.

And, incredibly, among the people who come to him to buy grain are ten of the sons of Jacob, the Israelites, the very ten who years ago talked about killing him and instead sold him into slavery.

The ten do not recognize their younger brother. They could not have forgotten him, obviously. In fact, he must have been on their minds and in their consciences almost daily. But not here — in Pharaoh's palace. Joseph, on the other hand, recognizes them immediately. And now, something of his own long-nurtured anger and resentment begins to surface. Joseph plays with them a bit, inquires about their father and their youngest brother, Benjamin. His bargain with them ultimately is "grain — for Benjamin." They are to return home, bring their youngest brother back and then they can buy Egyptian grain. When they comply, Joseph turns the screw one more time, insisting that they leave Benjamin behind.

And it is then that the remarkable reunion takes place. It is precipitated by one of the brothers, Judah, pleading with Joseph, not to break their father's heart by taking another of his sons away from him, and volunteers to stay himself in Benjamin's place. That's what does it: penetrates Joseph's soul, taps into years of anger and resentment and longing and missing his family. It's a remarkable scene. Joseph sends everybody out of the room and weeps so loudly that the whole house hears him and then the revelation. . . "I am Joseph, I am your brother. Is my father still alive?"

His brothers are scared to death and rightly so. Will Joseph treat them as they deserve to be treated?

The occasion is tense, potentially tragic and familiar. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing about the encounter says, "Every person and every family knows about these extremes of pain and estrangement. When yearning and hurt, deception and grief, hope and ruthlessness come together, and the family waits for resolution." [*Interpretation, Genesis*, p. 342]

There is, of course, only one way out of this — at least only one way that will allow life to go on. And it begins in the heart of the victim, the one who was most seriously wronged. Somehow an apology seems almost trite at this point so they don't even try. All the brothers can do is stand there in their guilt and hope against hope that Joseph is more benevolent than they have been.

Joseph has to let go, has to open his hands and release the years of anger, hurt and resentment. Joseph himself has to acknowledge a painful truth; namely that in the midst of wealth, power, influence and comfort, what he yearns for, what he really needs is to be reconciled with his brothers — his family. And what I believe happens in his soul is the realization that only he — the one wronged — can bring this off.

And that is what he does, lets go of the past and decides to live fully in the present and, hopefully, into the future.

Joseph forgives his brothers, invites them to forgive themselves, arranges for them to bring his father to Egypt, and before you know it, they are all weeping — the tears of relief and joy and restoration and reunion.

That is a "Genesis story" for Jews and for Christians and it contains a stunning affirmation. Joseph insists that even though there is plenty of interpersonal energy in the story, the primary actor is God.

That's remarkable. . . . God is present; an active reality, working — not at the high altar, not in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, but in the complexity of a human family struggling to live with a sense of reconciliation and hope.

God is in the business of reunion and reconciliation and new beginnings.

We live in a time that needs to hear that. We live in a world that needs men and women who believe it. There are plenty of conflicts along divides of race and religion and class and nationality. Ethnic pride and ethnic hostility are evidenced in violent conflict far away — in South Africa and Bosnia and in our own community. And the real danger is that after a while we begin to accommodate it and accept it intellectually and morally and politically — as the way things are. It takes courage and faith today to believe in the possibility of reconciliation and new beginnings in South Africa, in Northern Ireland, in Cabrini-Green. It takes courage and faith to speak for and work for that reconciliation and those new beginnings and our world, our nation, our city needs desperately men and women who believe it, and work for it. That, it seems to me, is what we are about here: people who actually believe in the possibility of new beginnings.

On a deeply personal level the old story gets under my skin with its proposal that God is the one who is always working for reunion and reconciliation and forgiveness.

My guess is that there are few, if any, of us who have not been victimized, wronged, slighted by family members, friends, colleagues, and who live in a state of suspended anger and resentment. My guess is that few if any of us regardless of our income or status or influence don't know in our heart of hearts that which we need most of all is to be reconciled — with brothers, sisters — with friends, enemies — with our God. The story urges us simply to do it: to let go of the past, to acknowledge our own need and to move on to a new future. It is not an easy move to make. There is a sense in which it is always easier to return anger and resentment and to continue living in separation. For some people — a new future may mean confronting, perhaps for the first time, the actuality, the enormity of abuse, for instance. The process is not simple and not without pain, and for some, at least, will require great personal stamina and professional help. But to all of us — to each of us — this old story points the only way to healing and reconciliation and new beginnings.

Jacob — Joseph — many times great grandparents of Jesus. . . . in whose name we gather and who we believe was God's own word to us. Behind this story is another story. . . .

We believe that, in the fullness of time, the reconciling work God was doing in this story of a particular family reunion, was done in an ultimate way. We believe that Jesus the Christ is the sign of God's love in the world. We believe that he is God's love — given in order to heal, reconcile, restore, forgive and make new not some abstraction — but your life and mine. Our deepest faith, and on blessed occasions, our deepest experience, is that in Jesus Christ God our creator has assumed the burden of the relationship and acted to bring us home — to forgive and heal and create new beginnings.

And so Jacob died at a ripe old age, his eyes dim, but not before they had seen his family reunited. On his death bed, Joseph brings his children and Jacob kisses them and breathes his last.

Family Reunion. Amen.